

It's Only A Cardboard Moon

by Anya Jiménez

VALERIE - 15-17. Bisexual. Preferably played by a Person of Color. Eager to get out of her small town, but isn't sure she's all that special. Outgoing, likes attention. Seems vain at first glance, but it's only to convince herself that she's confident.

KAI - 15-17. Lesbian. Preferably played by a Person of Color. Reserved, artistic. Quiet, and at times comes off as cold. She's learned that it's best to keep her head down and not make a scene, which is part of the reason why she doesn't let herself dream too much.

TIME: Pre-COVID 2019 or 2020. After school. Sometime between 4pm and 8pm.

PLACE: Suburban Midwest town. Kai's bedroom.

(Valerie and Kai sit on Kai's bed. Kai sits on the edge, with great posture, looking through the library of her digital camera. Valerie lounges - in a posed, semi-sultry way - further behind Kai. There's a bowl of chips sitting on the bed, in between the two. The lights are low, with the exception of a dramatic DIY spotlight. A gray, black, and white spray-painted cardboard circle sits in one corner - it kind of looks like the moon if you squint. Glowsticks are scattered around the room.)

KAI:

You can eat, you know.

VALERIE:

Hm?

KAI:

Those are for you.

VALERIE:

Oh thanks.

KAI:

So are you gonna eat?

VALERIE:

I don't wanna mess up my lipstick.

KAI:

You can reapply it.

VALERIE:

Yeah, but... *(she looks at herself in her front-facing camera, tilting her head to the side, paying extra close attention to her lips)* it looks so good.

KAI:

You don't have to eat if you're not hungry. I'm just saying, if you want to, you can. I need to, like... figure some shit out before we start shooting again, so.

VALERIE:

Like what?

KAI:

What?

VALERIE:

What are you figuring out?

KAI:

Oh, I don't know, just... *(she looks around the room and sighs.)* This.

VALERIE:

I'm lost.

KAI:

I mean, I don't - I don't know. I'm supposed to have, like, a vision for all this. A plan.

VALERIE:

You do have a plan.

KAI:

Not really.

(Pause.)

VALERIE:

Well how do they look?

KAI:

Fine.

VALERIE:

(disappointed)

Oh.

KAI:

No, I mean - well, *you* look great.

VALERIE:

(flattered - this is what she was waiting to hear)

Thank you.

KAI:

But the photos aren't so good.

VALERIE:

What's wrong with them?

KAI:

I don't know. There's just... I mean, space. It's like, you're sort of this - because, like, the original plan was to do this intergalactic bedroom scene, you know?

VALERIE:

Bedroom scene?

KAI:

Okay, not like *that*. I just mean space-themed, and in my bedroom, that's it.

VALERIE:

Right.

KAI:

And that's the whole idea.

VALERIE:

No, but like, it makes sense.

KAI:

How?

(A points to a spray-painted cardboard circle.)

VALERIE:

I mean, there's the moon.

(Kai nods. Valerie tries to think of something else.)

KAI:

And that's it.

VALERIE:

The lights are cool.

KAI:

Glowsticks aren't cool.

(Kai stands up and walks over to the colorful lights she has set up. She starts messing around with the settings. As she does, Valerie speaks. Kai is more focused on the lights than she is on A.)

VALERIE:

I don't know, it has like a laser tag vibe.

KAI:

Oh great. *(deadpan)*

Art is subjective. VALERIE:

This isn't art. This is art *class*. KAI:

(Valerie sits up.)

Does that make me your muse? VALERIE:

Sure. KAI:

Sure? VALERIE:

Sure. KAI:

(Pause.)

VALERIE:
You know, I don't think we're gonna have real costumes this year for the musical. Budget cuts.

KAI:
(absentmindedly)
Aw.

VALERIE:
You good?

KAI:
Yeah. Just *(she tugs the cord)* trying to *(she gives it another tug)* fix this fucking light.

VALERIE:
Oh. You want some help?

KAI:
No, it's fine.

(Pause. Kai continues trying to fix it.)

So what's this for anyway?

VALERIE:

I told you. Art class.

KAI:

No, I know, but what's the assignment?

VALERIE:

Oh. Yeah, we just have to do this, like, photoshoot.

KAI:

Just... a photoshoot?

VALERIE:

Yeah.

KAI:

What's the subject?

VALERIE:

Huh?

KAI:

I mean, she just told you to do a photoshoot, no inspiration, no prompt, or anything?

VALERIE:

No, like - well. We had one. Yes. We have to, like, capture beauty. Or redefine it or whatever.

KAI:

Capture beauty?

VALERIE:

And redefine it.

KAI:

And you're redefining it -

VALERIE:

KAI:

In space. Yeah. (*They look at each other for a moment.*) Didn't say it was good. That's just what it is.

VALERIE:

Okay.

KAI:

Okay. (*Pause. Kai studies Valerie's face. Valerie looks at Kai looking.*) I think I'm gonna try some portraits.

VALERIE:

Yeah?

KAI:

Yeah. Can you - (*she picks up a flashlight next to her and hands it to Kai.*) hold this?

VALERIE:

Mhm.

(*Kai looks around the room and tries to assess the light.*)

KAI:

It's too dark.

VALERIE:

Is that what the / flashlight is for?

KAI:

That's the goal. God I wish I had a dimmer.

VALERIE:

A dimmer?

KAI:

Yeah, I don't know. (*She starts setting up the camera again.*) I always thought that was like the height of luxury. I don't think I'm gonna get rich or anything. Definitely not famous. But I still wanna "make it." You know?

VALERIE:

Yeah.

KAI:

And as soon as I live in a house with a dimmer, I'll know I made it.

VALERIE:

I like that.

KAI:

Thanks. How about you?

VALERIE:

Hm?

KAI:

What's your dimmer?

VALERIE:

What?

KAI:

I mean, you wanna be some Hollywood girl right? What's your sign?

VALERIE:

Leo.

KAI:

The sign that you made it.

VALERIE:

Oh shit. I don't know. Never really thought about that. I just kinda want to - well. I don't - *(she sighs. She considers saying that she believes she'll be a movie star or a fashion model - someone beautiful and powerful. But in the pause, she lets her doubts take over, and decides not to say anything. She doesn't want to state that fantasy out loud, at the risk of it breaking as soon as it hangs in the air for a second too long. So, in no more than a few seconds of a pause, she simplifies what wants.)* I mean, I just want to get out of here. I guess. Doesn't really matter where I go, I just need to not be here. *(Kai stares at her.)* What?

KAI:

Your face is nice to look at.

VALERIE:

Is that how art people talk about faces?

KAI:

I'm not art people.

VALERIE:

I don't think anyone who's not an artist makes their room look like this.

KAI:

Having a camera does *not* make me an artist.

VALERIE:

Why not?

KAI:

Bro, if I knew the answer, maybe I'd be able to make some art.

(Valerie laughs.)

VALERIE:

Where should I be?

KAI:

This is fine.

VALERIE:

Okay.

KAI:

We can just do some close-ups here.

VALERIE:

What about the flashlight?

KAI:

Oh, yeah, let's just - *(she turns it on, then hands it back to Valerie.)* Can you hold it up? Like above you? It's supposed to look like a spotlight.

VALERIE:

Or a moonbeam.

KAI:

Sure. *(Valerie positions the flashlight.)* Perfect. *(Kai readies the camera.)* Ready?

VALERIE:

Ready.

KAI:

What are you doing with your lips?

VALERIE:

What?

KAI:

What's the *(she gives an exaggerated pout)*?

VALERIE:

Am I doing that?

KAI:

Yeah. You look like a porn star.

VALERIE:

You watch porn?

KAI:

You don't?

VALERIE:

I never said that.

KAI:

Okay.

VALERIE:

So what's wrong with my lips?

KAI:

They're very pretty, it's just like. A little pornographic.

VALERIE:

Okay.

KAI:

Just try something else.

VALERIE:

Okay. *(Kai starts taking pictures again. Valerie relaxes her mouth. After posing a couple times from a couple different angles, Valerie speaks again.)* I don't know. I think there's something so pornographic about having a mouth. You know?

KAI:

A mouth.

Yeah. VALERIE:

Just having one? KAI:

Well, having one on film. On tape. VALERIE:

This is digital. KAI:

On anything, then. VALERIE:
(Kai thinks for a moment.)

On your body? KAI:

On whose body? VALERIE:

Yours. KAI:

Is it my mouth? VALERIE:

What? KAI:

Is it my mouth on my body? Or someone else's? VALERIE:

Yours. Just yours. KAI:

Yeah. I think it is. VALERIE:

You do? KAI:

VALERIE:

Yeah.

(Pause.)

KAI:

Pornographic. *(Valerie nods.)* Pornographic means sex onscreen.

VALERIE:

Porn has been around a lot longer than screens.

KAI:

Fine, then, on paper. In writing. It's recorded. It's documented. If it's pornographic, it lives, like... outside of itself.

VALERIE:

Right.

KAI:

So what's pornographic about, just, having a mouth?

VALERIE:

I don't know. I don't know if I can explain it. Maybe it's different for guys.

KAI:

Well I'm not a guy.

VALERIE:

I know that.

KAI:

Then maybe it's just different for me.

VALERIE:

Or for me I guess. *(Kai readjusts her camera. Valerie looks at her and waits.)* I mean don't you always feel like you're being watched?

KAI:

I don't think I'm interesting enough to be watched.

VALERIE:

It's not about interesting.

KAI:

Then what is it about?

VALERIE:

I don't know. *(Pause.)* I was kinda sad you dropped out of 42nd Street.

KAI:

Can't sing.

VALERIE:

Neither can I.

KAI:

I can't dance either.

VALERIE:

Nobody can. I just wanted to see you in rehearsal.

KAI:

Me too. Just... things with my mom came up, and now / I have to work at the...

VALERIE:

Yeah, no you don't have to talk about it if you don't / want to.

KAI:

No, it's okay, it's just ... hard.

(Pause.)

VALERIE:

If you need any help with anything -

KAI:

You don't have to do that. But. Thank you.

VALERIE:

Of course. *(Pause.)* Want me to talk about something else? *(Kai nods.)* You know a lot of people tell me I should model.

KAI:

Yeah?

VALERIE:

Mhm. Went through a phase where I was obsessed with America's Next Top Model.

KAI:

Oh god.

VALERIE:

I watched every cycle.

KAI:

(laughing)

That show is awful.

VALERIE:

I honestly learned a lot.

KAI:

Like?

VALERIE:

Like, look. Take a picture. Okay? Just of my face.

KAI:

Okay.

(Kai steadies the camera and snaps a picture of Valerie's face.)

VALERIE:

Okay now do it again. *(Valerie changes her face ever so slightly, and Kai takes another picture.)* Now look look look.

(Valerie moves to look at the camera with Kai. She leans on Kai's shoulder as she watches the camera screen.)

KAI:

I don't think I'm that good or anything, so -

VALERIE:

No, it's not about the photographer, it's about the eyes. Look. *(She points at the screen.)* Now go to the first one. *(She does.)* See the difference?

(Kai looks up at Valerie, then back at the picture, then up at Valerie again. Kai definitely doesn't see a difference. Kai lies.)

KAI:

Yeah. I do.

VALERIE:

(laughing)

You don't have to lie.

KAI:

Look, I *want* to see it, I just don't. You look good, but. That's -

VALERIE:

That's what?

KAI:

That's normal.

VALERIE:

Me and my nice face?

KAI:

Yes. *(Pause.)* Relax.

VALERIE:

Huh?

KAI:

Your stomach.

VALERIE:

Oh, I - yeah, I know, I've been trying to hide the weight, it's not -

KAI:

No, I don't want you to hide it. The whole... redefining beauty thing, it's - *(she sighs, and starts a new sentence.)* I like seeing you as you are. Instead of as you're supposed to be.

And I do it too, I do the sucking in, the hiding myself, all of that, I just. I just really think you're cheating yourself of being seen. You're too busy being watched.

(Valerie relaxes her body. She slowly tries to stop posing, but finds herself in a somewhat uncomfortable position first.)

VALERIE:

I was walking down the street the other day, right, and I realized that there wasn't a single store window I didn't watch myself in. There's, like, mirrors *everywhere*. And you always have to *be* something in them. *(Kai nods.)* This is nice. *(Kai smiles.)* 42nd Street is gonna be really shitty.

KAI:

(with a laugh)

Yeah. *(They look at each other for a moment.)* Wanna take a couple more pictures?

VALERIE:

Sure.

KAI:

And then there's this pizza place that opened up on Liberty. Supposed to be pretty good.

VALERIE:

Is that the place with the stuffed crust?

KAI:

Yes!

VALERIE:

My sister said it's amazing.

KAI:

Then it's a date.

VALERIE:

A date?

KAI:

Yeah. *(A moment.)* You can put down the flashlight by the way. Gonna mess with the LEDs a bit.

(A nods, and looks at Kai as she fixes the lights.)

VALERIE:

Hey. Even if I never Make It anywhere? I'm glad I met you.

(Kai turns to face Valerie.)

KAI:

And even if I never get a dimmer, I'm glad you're in my life too. *(They both smile.)* Now hurry up so we can get a slice.

(Valerie and Kai ad-lib about the photoshoot as the lights dim. Blackout.)